# When America Censored Radio

## *Naval Censors Were Assigned To All Commercial And Private Radio Stations—There's Much More To This Story!*

**by R.B. Sturtevant, KD7KTS**

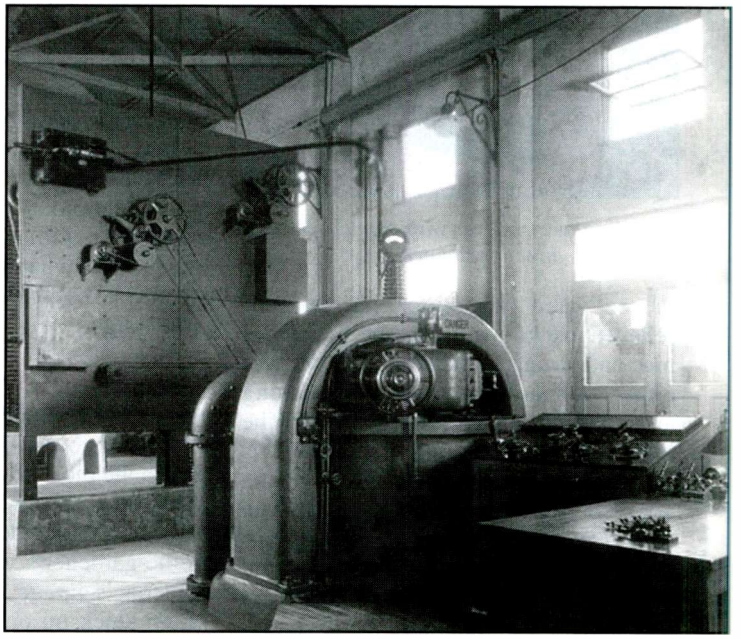
Somebody shot somebody else in Sarajevo and before long everybody was pointing guns at everyone else. I'm not talking about Yugoslavia in 1992, I'm talking about Serbia in June of *1914*. And, as Mark Twain said, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme." By July of 1914, World War I had broken out when Europe's tangle of alliances fell into play and everyone came down on one side or the other.

One thing was very clear to President Wilson: most Americans felt that the war was Europe's problem and the U.S. should remain neutral. As a neutral power we could sell goods and produce to both sides. That way America would soon become a creditor nation instead of a debtor nation. Business would boom and everyone would be making money. Wilson's job was to keep us out of the war and American troops home.

### Radio In Time Of War

To back up this strong stand on neutrality, Wilson issued an Executive Order on August 5, 1914, regarding wireless. The President prohibited "messages to be transmitted or received for delivery of an unneutral nature and from rendering to any one of the belligerents any unneutral service." "Unneutral" was defined as any act that would further the war efforts of one belligerent over another. Enforcement of this proclamation was delegated to the Navy. Most commercial wireless companies were owned by foreign nationals or firms based overseas, so the precaution was justified. This meant, in effect, that Naval censors were assigned to all commercial and private radio stations and required to review all messages sent or received. Nothing could be sent in a cipher or code unless the key was supplied to the censor. No messages were allowed in foreign languages unless a translation was provided. Amateurs were prohibited from communicating with stations in any belligerent nation. In one Naval District, however, amateurs were temporarily taken off the air completely.

The first test to the Executive Order came from the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company, a British firm. Its American president and general counsel challenged the proclamation on Constitutional grounds almost immediately. On September 2, the Marconi station at Siasconsett, on Nantucket Island, received a message from the British Cruiser *HMS Suffolk* addressed to an individual in New York. The message requested that supplies be delivered at sea off Sandy Hook, New Jersey. Marconi officials forwarded this message without referral to the Navy censors. The censors were ordered to shut down the station on September 24. The shutdown order remained in force until January 1915 when permission was granted to resume business.

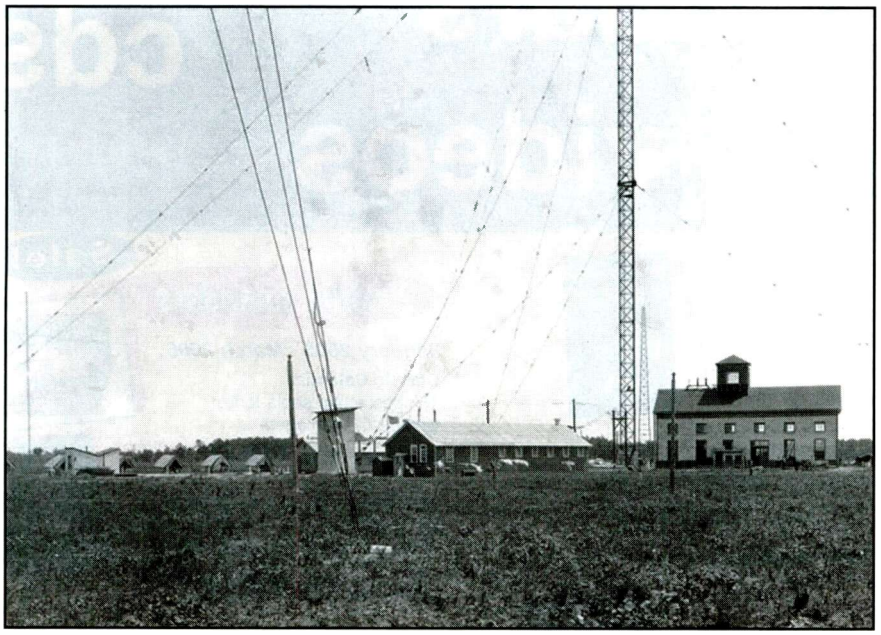


*The Sayville Telefunken Radio Transmitter at about the time of the famous spy case. The German Telefunken Company used their inside connection with a similar station located in Nauen, Germany. (Photo Courtesy Friends of Long Island Wireless History)*

### The Hostilities Hit Home

With the British fleet successfully blockading German and Austro-Hungarian ports, America's neutrality was working against the Germans. British, French, and Russian ships were carrying hundreds of tons of needed war supplies out of American ports, which German shipping could not reach. To draw ships away from the blockade, Germany ordered unrestricted submarine warfare in the waters around Britain. This allowed German submarine commanders to sink even neutral ships. Berlin also secretly authorized its ambassador in Washington to initiate sabotage operations against "every kind of factory for supplying munitions of war."

The first of these orders was to result in the German's sinking of the British passenger liner *Lusitania* with the loss of 128



*Here's the Sayville Telefunken station building around the time of World War I. (Photo Courtesy Friends of Long Island Wireless History)*

American lives. The latter order resulted in the Black Tom Pier explosion in New Jersey, when thousands of tons of munitions went up and a mysterious fire occurred in a Kingsland, New Jersey shell packing plant (both across the river from New York Harbor). There was also an unexplained fire that destroyed the Hercules Powder Company plant in Eddystone, Pennsylvania, as well as many other mysterious events.

## Tracking Down A Mystery

In the case of the *Lusitania*, it was obvious that someone had given the German submarine commander the departure time, course, and arrival time of the British liner. But who did it, and how had they gotten the information out of the country with Navy censors reading all messages going overseas? The government had already set up monitoring stations on both coasts and was in hot pursuit of any illegal transmitters. Secret Service investigators turned their attention to the commercial transmitters at Tuckerton, New Jersey, and Sayville, New York. Both stations were owned by Telefunken, a German firm with close ties to the German Admiralty. On the first day of the war, the British ship *HMS Telcon* had cut most of the German undersea cables. The wireless stations were the only way for Germany's Ambassador to communicate with Berlin.

Secret Service agents reviewed the messages from both stations and also monitored the Tuckerton station's output, comparing it with what was reported as messages sent out. So far nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Checking out the Sayville station's output was more difficult. They had equipment that allowed them to send Morse automatically at high speed, enabling them to send more traffic in a shorter time. The messages, on receipt, were slowed down from 200 or 300 words per minute to speeds that could be transcribed by operators reading at 20 to 30 words per minute. Telefunken had exclusive rights to this record/speedup/slowdown technology.

Chief of Secret Service William Flynn turned to his foremost expert on wireless, Lawrence Krumm, chief radio Inspector for New York. Krumm didn't know what to do about the problem, but he knew who would.

## A Radio Amateur Is Called In

An amateur radio operator named Charles Apgar worked for the Marconi Company in their Research and Development Department. He had already made several important inventions including the cardboard cones still used in speakers for radios today. Like any self-respecting radio amateur/design engineer, Apgar had a large, fully equipped ham shack in his home with all the latest gear. He even had a recording device, called an Audion, which he had developed for Marconi to be used to take dictation. Apgar was experimenting with an Audion to copy radio transmissions using his own equipment at home.

Krumm explained the problem with the Sayville station. He then asked Apgar if he could make recordings of the Sayville station traffic that could be slowed down and turned over to government code experts. On the night of June 7, 1915, Apgar recorded the message traffic from the Sayville station for four hours, beginning at 11 p.m.

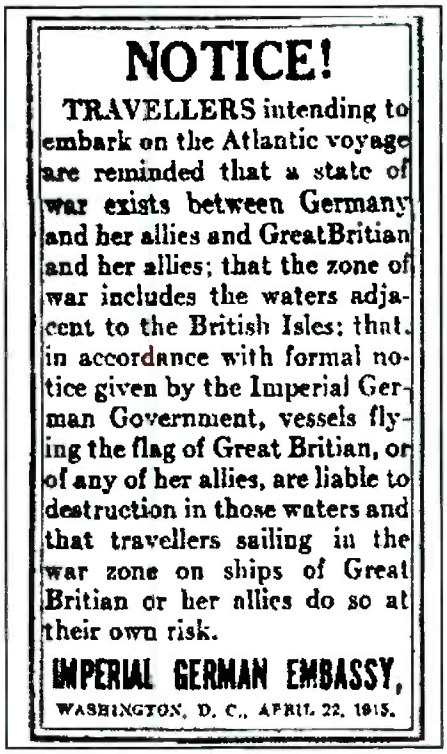
By June 21, the recordings were in Washington and the encrypted messages in the hands of Secret Service Chief Flynn. The coded messages were not in a single-message format like "Bertha is engaged to a nice boy," "Send always invoice before shipping knives," or "Myra has diphtheria." Instead they were included in the entire body of the message traffic with only a letter or a space appearing in any one message. The censors had seen all of the messages, but not the order in which they were sent, so no pattern had appeared to them.

The U.S. government ordered the Sayville station shut down immediately and punctuated the order with a contingent of Marines. The station reopened later under stricter supervision. Army intercept stations had been established on the Mexican border to catch any signals from the United States to German agents who were known to be in Mexico. The effort did not bear fruit, but that was probably because any German agents in America or Mexico were lying low.

## The British Were Monitoring!

In January 1917, the German Supreme High Command made the decision that all ships, regardless of flag, bound for an English, French, or Russian port would be sunk. This, they knew, would outrage the Americans and bring them into the war on the side of the Allies. They felt, however, that if America were involved in a war with Mexico the U.S. would not be able to send its 210,000-man Army to Europe.

To this end German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmerman sent a secret message to the President of Mexico. The message promised funds and military advisors to Mexico if Mexico, in return, would invade the southwest United States to reclaim Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and as much of California as they wanted. The message was sent by cable—one the Germans thought the British had missed. They hadn't. The



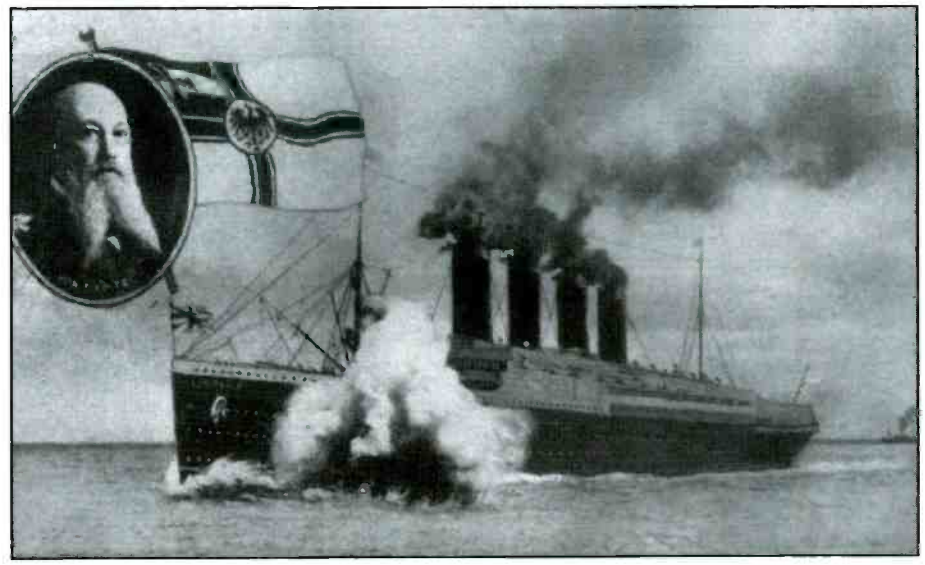
NOTICE!

TRAVELLERS intending to embark on the Atlantic voyage are reminded that a state of war exists between Germany and her allies and GreatBritian and her allies; that the zone of war includes the waters adjacent to the British Isles; that, in accordance with formal notice given by the Imperial German Government, vessels flying the flag of Great Britian, or of any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters and that travellers sailing in the war zone on ships of Great Britian or her allies do so at their own risk.

IMPERIAL GERMAN EMBASSY,

WASHINGTON, D. C., APRIL 22, 1915.

*Passengers boarding the Lusitania passed this warning notice.*



*(Photo Courtesy Temple University History Department)*

British were monitoring the cable, broke the coded message, and turned it over to President Wilson.

On April 6, 1917, Congress declared war on Germany. Many East Coast amateur radio operators knew about it 12 hours before it happened. They clearly heard a German wireless operator broadcast a warning to all German ships in American ports to avoid confiscation by raising steam and getting into international waters.

On April 18, the Secret Service raided the Sayville station and arrested 19 people as German spies. Tuckerton was raided at the same time and six spies were taken into custody. America never again allowed foreign nations to own large communications facilities inside the country.

## It's All About Service

What about Charlie Apgar? The government did not recognize his efforts during the war, probably because such a new way of catching spies would be useless with too much publicity. After the war, however, there was a lot of publicity when the story got out. *The New York World* described Apgar's efforts as "the most valuable service ever rendered by an amateur radio operator to our country."

Twenty-five years later, at age 75, Apgar issued a call to arms for 55,000 ham radio operators to help fight the fifth column's activities "a thousand times more perilous than they were in 1915 before the term was invented." Charlie never bothered to patent his inventions and so could not profit from them financially. No official government recognition was ever given. But he had the satisfaction of helping his country in a time of great need. And that, after all, is what being an amateur radio operator is all about. ■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